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SUBJECT: GHANA ELECTIONS: THE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

¶1. SUMMARY. For the first time in its history, Ghana has held two nationally-televised presidential debates in which the candidates for both major parties, along with the two minor parties that currently hold seats in Parliament, came together to answer questions on the issues facing the country. By any standard, the debates were an unqualified success. The candidates stayed on message, presented their party platforms, showed respect for one another, and committed their parties to fair and peaceful elections. With a few notable exceptions, the debates made for ho-hum political theater, but they served a greater purpose in reassuring Ghanaian voters that the candidates could criticize one another in a civil manner and still end up calling for peace at the end of the day. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Ghana's Institute of Economic Affairs (with funding from the British High Commission and the U.S. Center for International Private Enterprise) organized two presidential debates, the first in Accra on October 29 and the second in the northern city of Tamale on November 12. Although eight candidates are vying for president on the December 7 ballot, the Institute held the number of debaters down to the four parties which currently have Parliamentary representatives. The format for both debates was a formal question and answer session with each candidate given two minutes to respond in turn to questions from a pair of moderators from the media and academia. Questions had been solicited in advance from members of the general public, professional bodies, and other associations, and covered such subjects as education, development, the economy, agriculture, health, foreign affairs, corruption, and conflict resolution.

¶3. While the format left little room for actual debate between the presidential hopefuls, the two major party candidates -- Nana Akufo-Addo of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and John Atta-Mills of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) -- did manage to trade barbs in the first debate, with Akufo-Addo breaking the rhythm of the Q and A on several occasions to rebut Atta-Mills' assertions of failed NPP policies. All four aspirants showed more discipline in the second debate, although the question of corruption and declaration of personal assets (including a direct question from the moderator on how many houses each candidate owned) elicited more lively exchanges. All of the debaters admitted that corruption was a problem in Ghana, but Atta-Mills was more persistent in asserting that it "had gotten worse and worse with a level of ostentation not seen before." Akufo-Addo took this as an affront to the Kufuor years, and just as the debate was coming to a break, he insisted on being given the opportunity to respond to the accusation. The moderator held his ground, and said he would have his chance to respond later. After the break, however, Akufo-Addo apparently thought better of returning to this topic, and the subject was dropped.

¶4. Most impartial observers seemed to think that the Convention People's Party (CPP) candidate Paa Kwesi Nduom came out on top in the first debate, making short cogent

arguments and looking directly at the camera in a way that connected with the audience. He also had the best sound bites, the most memorable being his riposte to Akufo-Addo's declaration that the private sector was the engine of growth for the economy. To great audience delight, Nduom replied it didn't do much good to have an engine just laying there. "What I want to add is a body, and four tires, and a steering wheel, and a competent driver." Edward Mahama of the People's National Convention (PNC) was considered the weakest of the four in the first round, while Atta-Mills' answers seemed competent but uninspired. Akufo-Addo spent much of the debate looking at the floor and not at the camera as his answers frequently exceeded his time limit. In the second debate, however, Nduom did not match his first-round luster, while the other candidates, especially Akufo-Addo, improved markedly in both delivery and substance.

15. COMMENT. In the end, the real winner was the Ghanaian electorate, which witnessed two fine, issues-oriented debates in which their politicians all turned in credible performances, joked and chatted with each other during breaks, and behaved admirably on a national stage with live radio and television coverage and extensive post-debate analysis in all news media. As the candidates prepared to make their closing statements, the moderator asked them to publicly commit their parties to peaceful elections. Each in turn did so, but that was not enough for the moderator. He then asked them to all stand, hold hands, and together urge their followers to pursue peace. With those clasped hands and unified words, the debates came to an end.

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